

Creative Carbon Scotland

# Flows to the Future: Study Workshop Report 25th – 27th April 2017

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## Introduction

### Context

In April 2017, Creative Carbon Scotland (CCS) collaborated with the Peatlands Partnership, led by the RSPB on part of the Flows to the Future (FTTF) project. We worked with the RSPB's Project Manager, Caroline Eccles, the Community Engagement Officer Jenny Middlehurst and their Producer Jane Connarty, arts consultant to the FTTF Project, to deliver a two-day study workshop in Scotland's Flow Country in Caithness and Sutherland.

The workshop took place within the context of the Peatlands Partnership's commitment to involve cultural practitioners in the FTTF programme with the aim of widening awareness and promoting of the importance of the Flow Country.



### Aims

The workshop provided an exciting opportunity to bring together individuals from a range of disciplines including visual arts, music, literature, museums, education, ecology, climate science and archaeology with the joint aims of:

- Building the group's collective understandings of the Flow Country;
- Exploring the range of possibilities for artistic engagement with the Flow Country and contributing to the conservation and communication of its unique habitat and role in tackling climate change;
- Creating a forum for exchange and a longer-term community of interest in the Flow Country.

The programme also formed part of CCS's action-research project - culture/SHIFT - which seeks to understand the ways in which cultural practices can contribute to the transition towards a more environmentally sustainable Scotland.

## Workshop summary

CCS, Jane Connarty and Caroline Eccles identified and drew together a varied list of participants for the workshop, most of whom were able to spend the whole period from Tuesday 25 April in the evening until the afternoon of Thursday 27 April immersed in the Flow Country, whether visiting specific sites, travelling through it or using the visitor centre and field research centre at Forsinard. A full list of participants is provided at the end of this report.

## Readings of the Flow Country

Through presentations, discussion and guided walks the group was provided with a rich introduction to the Flow Country and the engagement of artistic practitioners in the FTTF programme to date. Over the two days presentations and contributions were made by the following participants:

- Caroline Eccles, FTTF Project Manager, RSPB
- Andrew Coupar, Policy & Advice Manager, Uplands & Peatlands, SNH
- Roxane Andersen, Peatland Scientist and Senior Research Fellow at the ERI
- Jill Harden, Archaeologist, RSPB
- Rosemary Macintosh, Administrator, Strathnaver Museum
- Sean Fraser, FTTF Artist-in-Residence
- Hannah Imlach, FTTF Artist-in-Residence
- Scott Morrison, Project Officer, Scottish Ensemble
- Donald Urquart, Visual Artist and Course Leader, ECA
- Mike Bonaventura, Principal Investigator, ClimateXChange

Emphasis was placed on the many layered readings of the Flow Country generated through the inter- and trans-disciplinary make-up of the group. Key points of discussion included:

- The very nature of the Flow Country as one of the world's most important and most extensive examples of a blanket peat bog – comprising 400,000 hectares of total area, 200,00 hectares in the core, of peat, at least 50cm deep
- The vital role of the Flow Country in mitigating climate change, storing 400 million tonnes of carbon, and providing ecosystem services, such as improving and maintaining water quality in rivers and their marine outflows;
- Its unique biodiversity, supporting birds, sphagnum moss and other plant life, insects and mammals;
- Social, environmental and economic shifts that have occurred over time including during the Highland clearances and in more recent history through forestry planting and the Dounreay nuclear power station development and the current peatland restoration programme.

- The work of the restoration programme: the impacts on the peat, wildlife and water courses of afforestation and of deforestation
- The challenges of enabling and encouraging the public to engage with the Flow Country, when the peat bogs seem on the surface to offer little to look at and are difficult both to explore and to understand.

Through the presentations, the discussions and the visits to particular sites of archaeological, biological and historical importance the interconnections between the social, cultural, environmental and economic factors became clear, achieving one of the aims of the workshop.



### Schedule of activities

**Tuesday:** In the afternoon participants made their way from all over Scotland to Inverness and then travelled to or joined us at Melvich, where we had introductions and dinner.

**Wednesday morning:** After an introduction from Gemma Lawrence of CCS about the workshop, we heard presentations from:

- Caroline Eccles, FTTF Project Manager, RSPB
- Andrew Coupar, Policy & Advice Manager, Uplands & Peatlands, SNH
- Roxane Andersen, Peatland Scientist and Senior Research Fellow at the ERI
- Jill Harden, Archaeologist, RSPB

These morning presentations strongly emphasised the scientific and natural history elements of the workshop, and demonstrated the complexity of the landscape and the



processes which formed it. They also provided evidence of the challenges of dealing with these complexities when it comes to the restoration of the peat bogs, including the lack of public awareness of their importance and the difficulties of increasing that public knowledge, owing to their geographical location and their unwelcoming appearance.

We then drove from Melvich to Bettyhill stopping at various points to look over the Flow Country and to visit the site of Rosal, a ruined village which thrived until the Sutherland Clearances in 1814, where Jill Harden spoke to us about how the landscape has been used over the ages and the lives of former times. The day finished at Strathnaver Museum in Bettyhill, where a short presentation from Rosemary Macintosh backed this up as the museum has items and materials from a range of periods in the local history. These visits, combined with Jill's presentation in the morning, complemented the scientific emphasis of the morning and brought out how the area's social history, right up to the present, is closely linked to the physical landscape. They also made clear the resources the land provides to humans as well as the challenges it presents in the maintenance and harvesting of those resources – challenges which are equally clear today, as demonstrated by the need for the peatland restoration.



We returned to Melvich and the day finished with presentations from the artists in residence, Shaun Fraser and Hannah Imlach, and the artistic organisations participating in the workshop. Shaun and Hannah described their practices, what they had so far experienced and learned in their visits to the Flow Country, and their thinking about the work they would eventually produce as a result of their residencies. Scott Morrison from the Scottish Ensemble described how the Ensemble works on projects with its non-arts

partners, and Donald Urquhart described the effect of a short visit to the Flow Country by the students on the Art Space Nature course at Edinburgh College of Art.

Finally Mike Bonaventura prompted a short discussion on transdisciplinarity, which linked the workshop with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals as well as organisational, social and individual needs; and touched upon the 'tyranny of structurelessness' which can cause problems in projects bringing together and crossing the boundaries of very different disciplines, which therefore require leadership and clear objectives.

### Thursday

On the Thursday morning we drove to Dyke where we walked into the peat bogs themselves with RSPB staff, Roxane and others to see at first hand and learn about the conditions that form the bog, the process of restoration through deforestation, the effects thereof and the remarkable plant and animal life that flourishes once the restoration work has begun. We looked at the different species of sphagnum moss, learned about the need for damming the drainage channels formed by the forestry and saw for ourselves the poor nature of the trees that had been planted decades ago. We noted the difficulty of accessing these areas – we needed to make use of four-wheel drive vehicles and un-made up roads which are not easily accessible to the public.

We then travelled to Forsinard to admire the new observation tower and the RSPB reserve, which provides a much more accessible way to see and experience the peat bogs, both from above and at ground level.

In the early afternoon at the Forsinard field centre we held a closing discussion, facilitated by Ben Twist from CCS, which aimed to bring together all the learning from the previous day and a half.



## Closing discussion summary points

1. The benefit of learning about the Flow Country from **multiple perspectives** - having the social and cultural history alongside the scientific and ecological understanding, and the **different scales** – the very local – Rosemary being born in the Flow Country – to the regional, national and global.
2. The workshop reinforced the cultural nature of landscapes and the **need for a new culture** of the Flow Country, in the shaping of which artists have a role to play. There is a need to make such places central to the sustainability of Scotland and this requires a cultural, political and social shift in consciousness of the importance of the peatlands, as well as a scientific and technical one.
3. The exploration of **timescales** was also another area of fruitful discussion – geological deep time, the Clearances history, lifetimes of individuals living in the Flow Country and the 2050 vision for the Scotland Peatland Strategy.
4. The level of ambition in the scientific programme at the Forsinard Field Centre and in the aspiration for the Flow Country to be recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the potential for Forsinard to also be a hub for **cultural research and innovation** which complements and contributes to the quality of scientific research and vice versa. The potential of this interconnectivity is important and rarely touched upon.
5. The potential benefits of a longer term, not necessarily high cost, **cultural coordinator** who could build upon and further the richness of artistic research in a similar way to the scientific research.
6. Artists can bring **more than just communication skills** and translation of facts to building understandings and appreciation of the Flow Country. There is great potential for artists to contribute to knowledge and understanding of the **complex system** of the Flow Country (that was one problem with the last eras: the Clearances, forestry were single focused, not complex) and to bring different ways of **thinking about and imaging the future** to help ensure its long term environmental, social and economic prosperity.
7. The **Climate Change duty on public bodies** which includes the third duty to ‘act sustainably’. This could be explored by organisations such as SNH through the hosting of roundtables or ‘**enlightenment salons**’ (similar to the workshop structure) which are fed back to Scottish Government. This would also fit with the general movement within climate change risk assessment towards a systems-led approach which is embracing a generalist collaborative approach rather than siloed disciplines.
8. The consideration of different forms of artistic engagement with the landscape. E.g. **performative, temporary installations, filmic works and events**. Examples such as Joseph Beuys’s work on Rannoch Moor and Hanna Tuuliki’s ‘Away with the Birds’ have potential to last in the cultural and public imagination, connecting people to distant places without necessarily requiring people to travel to witness the work.
9. The need to continue to involve **local artists** as well as those visiting.



10. The difficulties presented by the North Coast 500 (a tourism-focused 500 mile route around the north of Scotland) – the dashing past; **how to engage with that and encourage people to take time, take it in.** But it has increased footfall in the area. (Parallel with arts project in Western isles with similar issues)



## Extracts from participant survey feedback

**Q: Did the workshop enable you to gain greater awareness or understanding of the Flow Country/Flows to the Future Project?**

“Yes – the morning of the second day showed really clearly the regenerative work that is being done (and also something of the scale of the work). It was also great to hear from Hannah Imlach and Shaun Fraser about how their residencies had gone/were going and what they had been doing.”

“Yes. Although I had some knowledge of it, it brought out the interdisciplinary nature of it - and the sheer work involved. I hadn't realised the sheer scale and the value it brings.”

**Q: Did the workshop enable you to make new connections between your work and other areas? And, if so, how? For example, new knowledge, contacts, opportunities for new ways of working.**

“Contacts for future research information and joint planning”

“Yes - not so much through new contacts (although was unaware that RSPB had an archaeologist) but by its reinforcing of the importance of the cultural connections, of many different types, between the land and people.”

“Yes, great contacts made for future”

“It was valuable to renew acquaintances and, make new contacts. Of particular value was to see, first hand, the context for future projects.”

“Yes - greater knowledge of the work taking place at Forsinard and connecting with people, some completely new to us as an organisation, others who we had some contact with previously. I hope that there might be the possibility to develop some of these relationships further.”

“The workshop gave me the opportunity to make a valuable connection with a peatland scientist which I hope to pursue as I develop my creative work.”

“Yes - it allowed me to come into contact with disciplines (science, archaeology) I would have found it hard to encounter otherwise, and their insights provided an incredibly rich experience that truly opened up my thinking beyond its usual bounds.”

**Q: By participating in the workshop, has your thinking changed on the potential role of artistic practices and culture in addressing climate change and contributing towards environmental sustainability? And, if so, how?**

“Not sure about the artistic angle, other than the potential to reach audiences which might otherwise be missed. There probably is more that we could do on the cultural side, but need to be sure we get the angle and stories clear.”

“Confirmed ideas rather than a change in thinking, it was good to meet many like-minded people.”

“Yes, have become much more aware. It is the beginnings of something.”

“I think rather than changed, it has underlined thinking in this regard. As I think someone else said during the workshop, addressing climate change requires a cultural shift; the arts are an essential part of forming culture. We talked a lot too about artists working within complexity, and I think there is something important here too with climate change both complex and the general discourse often reductive.”

“Not changed so much as reinforced the need for transdisciplinary practice in effecting what is after all a cultural change.”

“I already have strong positive opinions on this subject but this opportunity definitely galvanised them, showing the exciting potential of transdisciplinary collaboration.”

“I was really impressed by the thought process that the artists go through - especially when they explained where a particular piece came from or meant, and I realise that maybe there are opportunities for more than just "translating" science”

“I always believed strongly in the ability of the arts to contribute towards positive environmental change, but to meet the artists in residence, and not just see their previous works, but also witness their process in the moment, was very interesting, and underlined the power of artistic perspectives and products to engage powerfully with environments and landscapes.”

**Q: Following the workshop, are there any ideas or opportunities which you would like to follow up on, either contributing directly to the FTTF Project or more widely?**

“Yes - access to the landscape and knowledgeable people. I am making a return visit shortly.”

“Joint hosting of workshops/activities to promote learning”

“Generally, I’m really excited to see what develops from the project and look forward to following as an interested resident as well as professionally.”

“I like the idea of the Patrick Geddes meetings. I think we'd like to help come up with a Green Tease-type event as part of the public engagement”

“I'd be happy to support artists at the next Flow Conference”

“I would love to continue our engagement with FTTF/The Flow Country area.”

**Q: Were there any highlights in the programme which you found particularly valuable?**

“Really good holistic approach to the whole subject of the Flow country: environmental, social, historical, all really valuable”

“Being out in the landscape with access to expertise.”

“The entire visit was fascinating and thoroughly educational. The contributions from Jill Harden (RSPB Archaeologist) and Rosemary MacIntosh (Strathnavar Museum) really brought the landscape to life for me.”

“Being out in the peatland with such a varied group of specialists who were able to explain how to identify species and understand archaeological sites.”

“Jill's contributions helped me understand the constant change that the area has undergone: obvious perhaps but nonetheless important. Roxanne's ability to communicate the science. And both of their enthusiasm. And the overall bringing together of the project was very valuable - seeing how it all fits together. The lookout tower is lovely.”

“For me the most valuable thing was the amazingly varied combination of different experiences. From detailed talks to hands-on outdoor experiences; from international scientists to local inhabitants of the region, the mix of voices and disciplines combined through these differing experiences gave me one of the richest experiences I've ever had, allowing me to appreciate the amazing complexity of the region at every level of scale: from vast expanses to tiny sphagnum stems, from physical remnants of the clearances to personal memories from childhood.”

## **Workshop participants**

Dr Roxane Andersen, Peatland Scientist, Environmental Research Institute North Highland College UHI

Mike Bonaventura, Principal Investigator, ClimateXChange

Michael Bullen, Studio Manager, North Lands Creative Glass

Justin Carter, Visual artist and Reader in Contemporary Art Practice: Art and Environment, Glasgow School of Art

Jane Connarty, independent Visual Arts Producer, advisor to Flows to the Future Project

Dr Andrew Coupar, Policy & Advice Manager, Uplands & Peatlands at Scottish Natural Heritage

Frances Davis, Curator, Timespan

Caroline Eccles, Project Manager, Flows to the Future, RSPB Forsinard

Shaun Fraser, Visual Artist and Flows to the Future Artist-in-Residence

Jill Harden, Archaeologist, RSPB

Hannah Imlach, Visual Artist and Flows to the Future Artist-in-Residence, Glasgow

Prof Kathleen Jamie, Poet and Writer, and Professor of Poetry, University of Stirling

Gemma Lawrence, Producer, Creative Carbon Scotland

Rosemary Macintosh, Administrator, Strathnavar Museum

Fiona MacKenzie, Development Officer Strathnavar Museum

Jenny Middlehurst, Communities Officer, Flows to the Future, RSPB Forsinard

Scott Morrison, Project Officer, Scottish Ensemble

Graham Thompson, Site Manager, RSPB Forsinard Flows nature reserve

Ben Twist, Director, Creative Carbon Scotland

Donald Urquhart, Visual artist and Course Leader, Art, Space & Nature (MA/MFA), Edinburgh College of Art

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